Henry Bonilla 1954-

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1993-2007 REPUBLICAN FROM TEXAS

Bonilla left his career in television and ran for public office in 1992 after being inspired by then-Minority Whip Newt Gingrich. From his perch on the Appropriations Committee, where he eventually served as one of 13 powerful subcommittee chairmen, Bonilla championed deregulation and espoused fiscal conservatism. Portrayed as the GOP's inroad into a primarily Democratic Hispanic electorate, Bonilla played down his ethnicity. "[When I] look in the mirror in the morning, I'm American first," he noted.

The son of a civil service worker at Kelly Air Force Base, Henry Bonilla was born in San Antonio, Texas, on January 2, 1954. Bonilla was the oldest of three boys and two girls. He lived two blocks away from South San Antonio High School, from which he graduated in 1972. Bonilla admitted to being a lackluster student in a school rocked by teacher walkouts and a high dropout rate. "My school didn't motivate me, but I watched a lot of TV and realized that there was a lot more to the world than what I experienced within the one-mile radius of where I lived," he said. Coverage of President Richard M. Nixon's trip to China in 1972 solidified Bonilla's conservative beliefs. "I realized that all of the overarching ideals I had about politics—a belief in the free enterprise system, a strong defense, less government—did not have a thing in common with the Democratic Party," he noted. "So I became a Republican." An essay Bonilla wrote about Nixon's China diplomacy won him a college scholarship.² He earned his B.A. from the University of Texas at Austin in 1976 and then began a career in television news. Bonilla started as a reporter for two stations in Austin from 1976 to 1980 before moving to Philadelphia to serve as press secretary for Pennsylvania governor Dick Thornburgh for a year in 1981; this post would be his only experience in

politics before he was elected to Congress. He stayed in the Northeast, working as a news producer for a flagship ABC station in New York City. In 1985 he returned to Philadelphia for a year to serve as an assistant news director for a local station, before becoming an executive producer for KENS-TV and settling in San Antonio in 1986. There he met his future wife, Deborah Knapp, a television anchor in a highly rated San Antonio news program. The couple had two children, Alicia and Austin.

In 1992, Bonilla cited Minority Whip Newt Gingrich of Georgia as his inspiration to run for a seat in the U.S. House.³ Supporting the conservative platforms espoused by the Georgia leader proved difficult in the overwhelmingly Democratic district, the birthplace of the La Raza Unida activist movement. Drawn after the 1990 Census as an "incumbency protection plan" for Democratic Congressman Albert Bustamante, the district covered 58,000 square miles across a wide swath of southwest Texas. A mix of Hispanic barrios (low-income neighborhoods) near Laredo—including eight of the 20 poorest counties in the state—and wealthy areas such as the San Antonio suburbs in Bexar County, El Paso desert, and Midland Oil Fields (home to affluent ranchers and oil industry executives) made up the district.4 With more than 60 percent of its population being of Mexican-American origin, the district was the largest in the Texas delegation—measuring roughly the size of Illinois—and shared a longer stretch of the Mexican border (800 miles) than any other congressional district.⁵ Bonilla immediately contrasted himself with Bustamante, who had more than 30 overdrafts in the House "Bank," an informal institution run by the Sergeant at Arms in to which some Members deposited their congressional pay. Though Bustamante had few overdrafts compared with some of the worst offenders, Bonilla hit his opponent hard in an attempt to



appeal to frugal working-class immigrants, using the term "cheques calientes" (hot checks) throughout his campaign and evoking gangster Al Capone.⁶ An untarnished political newcomer, Bonilla was attractive because of his personality and his skill as a news producer. "Blitzing" the district with well-crafted TV advertisements, Bonilla appealed to small business owners and conservative Democrats.⁷ He took a leave of absence from the TV station to drive across Southern Texas, meeting with voters and conversing in Spanish with locals in coffee shops and cafes.

Bonilla also faced scrutiny in the hard-fought campaign. On September 28, Bustamante a filed a complaint with the Federal Election Commission (FEC) claiming that the San Antonio news station employing Bonilla provided biased campaign coverage in the challenger's favor. The FEC eventually determined that the Bonillas had no intention of violating campaign law, and the couple later turned the scandal into an asset. Working full-time for the campaign, Deborah Bonilla added local celebrity star power to her husband's appearances.

Bonilla's cross-party appeal ultimately secured his victory. Democratic presidential candidate William J. (Bill) Clinton narrowly won the district with 42 percent of the vote, versus 41 percent for President George H. W. Bush and 17 percent for Independent Ross Perot. Voters crossed party lines and were frequently seen sporting Bonilla's campaign buttons alongside Clinton's. 10 Bonilla defeated the incumbent with 59 percent of the vote by sweeping the more conservative San Antonio suburbs, coming closer than expected in Laredo, and taking other border counties. 11 Part of a wave of anti-incumbency that swept in the largest freshman class in 60 years, Bonilla was confident that his conservative platform had reached national prominence. "The gravity is clear with this [Republican] side because the philosophy of our party is more in sync with the working man," he noted. 12 In subsequent elections, Democrats had difficulty getting candidates to run against Bonilla.¹³ The district supported Clinton and Bonilla again in 1996, the latter winning with 63 percent of the vote. For the next three election cycles, Bonilla won easily, with close to 60 percent of the vote. The district was so safe in 1998,

the *San Antonio Express-News* described Bonilla's political clout as "strong as [an] acre of garlic." ¹⁴

Bonilla was active in the House Republican Conference throughout his congressional career, and his leadership earned him the title the "Quiet Giant." House Republicans came to appreciate his media savvy; in 1993 they selected Bonilla to deliver the GOP response to President Clinton's radio address advocating his proposals for health care reform.

Despite his national appeal, Bonilla kept his Texas district at the forefront of his legislative interests. He was a strong supporter of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which passed in 1993 with the firm backing of President Clinton and many congressional Republicans. Bonilla believed that the agreement which would eliminate tariffs on goods moving across the Mexican border over the next 15 years—would increase business traffic and make goods cheaper in Texas' beleaguered border towns. "We must take a stand for economic growth and opportunity. When we enter new markets—such as the ones NAFTA will give us—we win," he told his colleagues on the House Floor. "This is a nation of competitors—and winners. When Americans compete, they win."17 Bonilla traveled with Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole of Kansas throughout South Texas to rally support for the agreement. Bonilla's backing the bill, however, rested on assurances of improvements to the safety of Mexican trucks.18 He later obtained \$10 million in aid for garment and farm workers who lost jobs because of the flood of cheap Mexican goods into the U.S. market.¹⁹

On national issues, Bonilla's fiscal conservatism defined his career, particularly his belief that government overregulation inhibited the growth of private business. "The greatest burden that ... entrepreneurs and those who wish to pursue the American dream have today," Bonilla declared, "is the regulatory burden they face every time they walk out the door, trying to create more jobs, trying to be more productive in this country." His positions often put him at odds with the Occupational Safety and Hazards Administration (OSHA)—the federal agency charged with enforcing safety standards in the workplace—

over its regulatory power.²¹ After the GOP gained a majority in the House in the 1994 elections, Bonilla first addressed the federal regulation of safety standards, advocating amending the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act to allow children under 18 to operate cardboard balers and box compactors.²² He also took on the United Parcel Service (UPS) after it received a number of OSHA complaints from workers who frequently lifted heavy packages.²³ Bonilla continued to fight OSHA's regulatory power, opposing an attempt by the House in 1998 to require tougher flame retardant standards for infant pajamas.²⁴ He also attempted to block Democratic efforts to require the inclusion of country of origin on beef labels during the height of the nationwide scare over Mad Cow disease, an illness that affected British beef cows. Despite arguments that such labels would help the American beef industry, Bonilla sided with packers, because he thought the new regulations would be too expensive and burdensome for them.²⁵

Bonilla also expressed his disapproval of government regulation by introducing a bill placing a moratorium on the addition of animals to the Endangered Species Act (ESA), claiming the 1973 act unduly burdened landowners. "In its current form the Endangered Species Act—though well intentioned—works contrary to, and often against one particular species—the human being," he told his colleagues. Referencing ESA-protected species in his district, he said, "Many hardworking ranchers, farmers, and homeowners in Texas have a greater fear of the gold cheeked warbler than they do of tax hikes and tornadoes."26 After the Committee on Resources held up his bill, Bonilla eventually attached the legislation to a defense spending bill. Regarding critics who questioned the amendment's relevance to the Pentagon's budget, Bonilla said, "I reminded them that in addition to being used against private property owners, ESA regulations have been used to curtail training exercises at some of our military installations."27 After the amendment was pulled from the defense appropriations, Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas added it to Department of the Interior appropriations, but as part of a compromise with the Clinton administration, the final legislation gave the President authority to lift the moratorium if he saw fit. Bonilla was among a small minority that opposed the bill based on this provision. Clinton exercised his prerogative the same day he approved the law, April 26, 1996.²⁸

Bonilla won appointment to the powerful Appropriations Committee in his freshman term, a position he held throughout his Capitol Hill career. In 2001, benefiting from term limits imposed on committee chairs by the Republican Conference, Bonilla leapfrogged two senior Republicans on the committee to chair the Subcommittee Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies for the 107th Congress (2001–2003), serving in that position for the rest of his congressional career. From his new perch as a "cardinal"—the designation given the powerful Appropriations subcommittee chairmen—Bonilla exercised even greater influence on fiscal matters.

Fights over government spending, however, pitted Bonilla and other GOP appropriators against party leadership in a battle over appropriations legislation that highlighted fissures within the GOP and between the legislative and executive branches in the early 2000s. The George W. Bush administration advocated restraint in congressional budget proposals, and the House Republican leadership felt pressure to comply. But Bonilla proved to be a staunch defender of lawmakers' ability to add earmarks in appropriations bills. Bonilla's subcommittee's first appropriation bill in 2001 included \$1.6 billion more than the President requested, including \$20 million earmarked by Bonilla for the sheep and goat ranchers in his district.³¹ Bonilla and several other cardinals found themselves in a showdown over the spending limitations established by House leadership and the White House. The battle came to a head in May 2002 over a typically straightforward procedural move: approving the rules of debate for a \$29.4 billion fiscal year 2002 emergency spending bill, which provided money for domestic defense against bioterrorism as well as for the military campaign in Afghanistan. The popular bill had the strong support of Bush administration officials, who warned of an imminent terrorist attack like

those of September 11, 2001. Bonilla and three other Republicans on the Appropriations Committee supported the legislation but protested last-minute changes limiting discretionary spending in fiscal year 2003, sweetening the legislation for fiscal conservatives. Despite heavy courting from Speaker J. Dennis Hastert of Illinois and Majority Leader Tom DeLay of Texas, Bonilla, along with colleagues George Nethercutt of Washington and Zach Wamp of Tennessee, held firm, voting "present" in the final tally. Other appropriators voted against the rule, which passed, 216 to 209.³² The GOP retaliated against its intransigent cardinals by mandating that henceforth their selection would be by Party leadership instead of by seniority.³³

Bonilla's support among Hispanics in his district dropped precipitously throughout his career, and in his victory against Democrat Henry Cuellar by a slim 52 percent in 2002, only 8 percent of Latinos supported him.34 Texas GOP lawmakers attempted to make Bonilla's district safer for him by slicing out more than 100,000 Hispanic voters in Webb County.³⁵ The new map also added Republican strongholds in Bandera, Kerr, and Kendall counties, northwest of San Antonio. Moreover, it isolated Hispanics who were formerly Bonilla's constituents in one of several long, narrow districts 10 miles wide and more than 300 miles north to south.³⁶ Bonilla's new district also kept most of the West Texas ranchers and oil and gas executives who had solidly supported him in the past.³⁷ Within the new borders, Bonilla won with a comfortable 69 percent of the vote over Democrat Joe Sullivan.³⁸

Yet the Supreme Court ruled against the Texas redistricting plan, arguing that Bonilla's district had violated the 1965 Voting Rights Act in June 2006.³⁹ Bonilla initially lobbied for the change to take place after the 2006 elections, months away. "Logistically, it is so difficult now to make a huge change before the November election," he told the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. "It would probably be wise to wait for the Legislature to do it when they convene next year." The court's decision changed the November 7 general election to a "blanket primary" in which candidates from both parties appeared on the same ballot, inspiring six Democratic challengers and

one Independent challenger. Bonilla drew high-ranking Republicans to South Texas to campaign for him. He had the ardent support of Majority Leader DeLay. ⁴¹ Vice President Richard (Dick) Cheney also held a fundraiser for him in October, and political strategist Karl Rove campaigned on his behalf. ⁴² Bonilla's substantial war chest of more than \$2 million dwarfed those of his opponents. ⁴³ In the November election, he took 48.6 percent of the vote, narrowly missing the 50 percent required by state law to seal a victory. Former Democratic Representative Ciro Rodriguez, who had narrowly lost a primary election in 2004 against Henry Cuellar, was the closest challenger, with 19.9 percent of the vote. The two faced each other in a runoff election scheduled for December 12, 2006.

The cash-strapped Rodriguez, who had considered dropping out of the race, received an infusion of support and money from the national Democratic Party, fresh from winning a new House majority in the 110th Congress (2007–2009).44 Dubbed a "coconut"—a Hispanic who forgets his ethnic roots—by some of his opponents, Bonilla touted his pro-business legislative record, noting, "Job growth is not along ethnic lines."45 Large financial contributions quickly spawned a series of negative television ads featuring both candidates. Rodriguez attempted unsuccessfully to change the date of the runoff since it fell on the Feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a Mexican Catholic holiday that would occupy his Hispanic base with church services, parades, and celebrations. But despite the holiday, Hispanic voters catapulted Rodriguez to a surprising victory; he took 53.3 percent of the vote to Bonilla's 46.7 percent. 46 Bonilla lost four counties in his West Texas stronghold because of low voter turnout. 47

Shortly after Bonilla left Congress, President Bush nominated him to be ambassador to the Organization of American States, a body of delegates from nations in the Western Hemisphere that discuss policy affecting the region. Bonilla withdrew his nomination three months later, citing the U.S. Senate's failure to confirm him for the position. He subsequently joined a lobbying firm.⁴⁸

FOR FURTHER READING

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NOTES

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- 2 "The Other Henry," *Texas Monthly* 21, no. 12 (December 1993): 110.
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- 4 Scott Pendleton, "Inspired by 'Superstar' Congressman, Hispanic Republicans Run for Office," 16 March 1994, *Christian Science Monitor*: 12; *Politics in America*, 1994 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1993): 1517.
- 5 Politics in America, 2000 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1999): 1346; "Remember the Alamo: San Antonio Foes in Shootout," 22 October 1992, National Journal's Congress Daily; Politics in America, 2004 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2003): 1577.
- 6 Politics in America, 1994: 1516.
- 7 "The Other Henry": 110.
- 8 Bustamante also noted that Bonilla's wife had used the station's computers, phones, and faxes to raise funds for her husband in violation of campaign finance laws. Deborah Bonilla subsequently apologized for her actions and took a leave of absence, and the campaign repaid the station for the use of the equipment. The station also issued an on-air apology and explanation. "Deborah made some mistakes by not following the guidelines I laid down when Henry first announced," acknowledged news director Bob Rogers. "I told them they had to be pure as the driven snow." See, for example, James Cox, "Congressman: TV station biased," 1 October 1992, USA Today: 2B; David McLemore, "No Liberal Media Bias in San Antonio Cases," 4 October 1992, Dallas Morning News: 46A; Howard Kurtz, "Big Apple Gets Plum Spot," 9 October 1992, Washington Post: B4.
- 9 Politics in America, 1994: 1516. The entire complaint filed by the Bustamante campaign is available at Federal Election Commission, Matter under Review Archive–1975 through 1998, MUR no. 3631, http://mur.nictusa.com/mur/3631.pdf (accessed 23 February 2010).
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- 16 Al Kamen, "In the Loop," 15 October 1993, Washington Post: A23.
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- 22 Congressional Record, House, 104th Cong., 1st sess. (24 October 1995): H10665.
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- 27 Politics in America, 1998 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1997): 1425.
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- 29 The Appropriations Committee was Bonilla's only assignment to a standing committee. He also served on the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina in the 109th Congress (2005–2007). See Garrison Nelson and Charles Stewart III, Committees in the U.S. Congress, 1993–2010 (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2011): 595.
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- 36 Hocking, "Bonilla: A 'Quiet Giant." For maps, see Bickerstaff, *Lines in the Sand*: 392–393. For a multi-layered interactive map that outlines all the changes that took place in Texas congressional districts from 2001 to 2010, see Texas Legislative Council, "DistrictViewer," http://gis1.tlc.state.tx.us/ (accessed 17 February 2010).
- 37 Texas Legislative Council, "DistrictViewer." The exception was half of Sutton County and several other counties southwest of Midland, all Bonilla strongholds with natural gas and ranching as their main industries. The new plan moved those counties to a district that was eventually represented by Representative Michael Conaway. "A West Texas Hamlet Adjusts to Being Split by Redistricting," 30 November 2003, New York Times: N34.
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- his indictment. He also was the second-largest contributor to the embattled Majority Leader's legal defense fund in March of 2005, having donated \$15,000. Bonilla's American Dream Political Action Committee, created to raise funds to support minority GOP candidates, eventually faced scrutiny because much of the money went toward DeLay's legal fees. Hocking, "Bonilla: A 'Quiet Giant'"; Carlos Guerra, "Bonilla Has Benefited Greatly from His Loyalty to Tom DeLay," 30 November 2006, *San Antonio Express-News*: 1B.
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"ALL TOO OFTEN HISPANICS ARE PORTRAYED AS VICTIMS, COWERING IN THE NEIGHBORHOODS WAITING FOR THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO RESCUE THEM. THIS IS SIMPLY NOT THE CASE. THERE IS A BOOMING HISPANIC MIDDLE CLASS, WITH GOOD PROSPECTS for future growth.... I don't KNOW ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO REPRESENT THESE 'PROFESSIONAL MINORITY' GROUPS, BUT WHEN I LOOK IN THE MIRROR EVERY MORNING I FIRST SEE AN AMERICAN. I'M PROUD OF MY CULTURE, BUT MORE PROUD AND GRATEFUL TO SAY THAT I LIVE IN THIS COUNTRY."

Henry Bonilla

Almanac of American Politics, 2004